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ABSTRACT

On December 11, 1997, the Child Care Action Campaign (CCAC) hosted an audioconference to explore the issue of how parents seeking to get off welfare can learn about subsidies available for child care in the transition from welfare to work. Presenters were Doug Baird, president of Associated Day Care Services in Boston, who discussed lessons of a Massachusetts public awareness campaign to increase child care subsidy utilization; Laurie Miller, senior program associate at CCAC, who presented findings of a three-state study of Transitional Child Care (TCC); and Carol Novrit, director of the Morris, Sussex, Warren (New Jersey) Offices of Workforce Development, who described how her office has successfully linked parents to child care subsidies and what challenges she faces in the future. After summarizing the presentations, this issue brief concludes with some tips on informing parents effectively. (EV)

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Informing Parents about Child Care Subsidies

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Overview

Affordable, good quality child care is an everyday need of working families across America and an absolutely pivotal condition of economic self-sufficiency for families that seek to get off welfare. In the past, families transitioning from welfare to work were entitled to federal Transitional Child Care (TCC) subsidies for at least the first year after a parent left welfare, and for longer periods in some states. However, many eligible parents did not use these benefits, which were there for the asking.

Why was the transitional child care subsidy utilization rate so low? One answer is that many parents did not know about the subsidy. This raises a serious question for all policy makers who expect parents to use child care support as they move off welfare and into jobs. But if parents did not learn about TCC, how will they learn about post-welfare subsidies that are taking the place of the former federal program?

On December 11, 1997, the Child Care Action Campaign (CCAC) hosted an audioconference to explore this issue. Presenters were Doug Baird, president of Associated Day Care Services in Boston, who discussed lessons of a Massachusetts public awareness campaign to increase child care subsidy utilization; Laurie Miller, senior program associate at CCAC, who presented findings of a three-state study of TCC; and Carol Novrit, director of the Morris, Sussex, Warren (NJ) Offices of Workforce Development, who described how her office has successfully linked parents to child care subsidies and what challenges she faces in the future.

Participants in the CCAC Audioconference

Presenters

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Associated Day Care Services
Boston, MA

Laurie Miller
Child Care Action Campaign

Carol Novrit
Morris, Sussex, Warren County Offices of Workforce Development

Issue Brief

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Child Care Action Campaign

Massachusetts: Community-based Outreach to Parents

Doug Baird explained how Massachusetts discovered the underutilization of TCC by eligible families. In 1996, Associated Day Care Services, an agency that provides child care to low-income families in the Boston area, added capacity to meet a projected rise in demand caused by families moving from welfare to work. But demand didn't grow as expected, and Associated had many more vacancies than it anticipated.

This situation was puzzling because state child care appropriations in FY 1995 and FY 1996 were sufficient to cover a large proportion of the children whose parents were on welfare and needed care while in training or jobs or while in transition to permanent employment. But by the final quarter of FY 1996, the state had spent only two-thirds of the amount appropriated for this purpose. A full $35 million, one-third of the Massachusetts child care budget, was not spent in 1996.

Associated worked with the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance to figure out why so many eligible families were not receiving TCC. It was discovered that the Department of Transitional Assistance, which was responsible for assisting families move from welfare to work, was giving conflicting messages to parents. On the one hand, they encouraged clients to end their involvement with the welfare agency. On the other hand, they encouraged clients to remain involved with the agency in order to get child care. According to Baird, "Oftentimes families found it hard to under-

stand that the welfare worker was saying, a) please go away, and b) please come and get your transitional child care."

Baird further analyzed the problem by looking at the eligible families that did not access TCC and trying to figure out how to increase their utilization of subsidies. He learned that many of these families were immigrants, particularly from the Caribbean, who had misgivings about their relationships with the welfare department in general and misconceptions about child care subsidies in particular. "The message they hear one way or another is stay away from your welfare office," Baird said.

To reverse these false perceptions, staff of the child care resource and referral agencies and the child care agencies in Boston and other urban areas in the state have conducted numerous one-on-one sessions with families. In addition, child welfare advocates have worked with parents on a community-by-community level. They help parents understand that child care assistance does not jeopardize either their legal status or other types of assistance.

These outreach and education efforts have resulted in a steady increase in utilization of child care subsidies in cities across the state. Between 1995 and 1997 the TCC utilization rate increased from 5 percent to 20 percent. Although the rate of take-up continues to be lower in communities with large numbers of refugees, Massachusetts has been successful overall in uniting child care providers, resource and referral agencies, and welfare offices in coordinated efforts to inform families about available child care subsidies.

Findings from a Three-State Study of Transitional Child Care

Laurie Miller described CCAC's study of TCC in Georgia, New Jersey, and Washington. She outlined findings about barriers to the use of child care subsidies and effective methods of informing parents about them.

In mid-1995, when the study began, TCC was a federal entitlement under the 1988 Family Support Act. As part of the federal welfare overhaul of 1996, TCC was abolished as an entitlement and lumped with other child care funding streams in a block grant to states for their use under broad guidelines. In Georgia, the first state studied, CCAC looked only at TCC use. In New Jersey and Washington, however, CCAC broadened the scope of inquiry to examine both former TCC use and features of other low-income subsidies. Even though TCC no longer exists as a federal program, lessons learned in administering it are directly relevant to effective administration of child care subsidies for families leaving welfare for jobs.

In each state, data was collected from county administrators and caseworkers in three or four counties, and from parents by means of surveys and focus groups. One of the most important effects of the study was to bring the experiences and views of parents and front line caseworkers to the attention of state officials.

Approximately 30 workers, administrators, and officials were interviewed in each state. Surveys of 300 parents in Georgia, 550 in New Jersey, and 460 in Washington provided information about parent experiences in accessing low-income child care subsidies. CCAC also held focus groups with 20 parents in each state to learn more about their child care choices. CCAC is still analyzing findings from Washington, but in Georgia and New Jersey the findings are known.

In all four Georgia counties studied, only about one-third of families eligible for TCC actually used the subsidy. In New Jersey, all three counties studied had utilization rates above 45 percent and one had achieved a 70 percent utilization.

In administrator interviews in Georgia, CCAC learned that as many as nine workers shared responsibility for notification and eligibility determination, applications, and enrollments, and they often communicated with each other in haphazard fashion. The system was frustrating to parents and weakened the program. In addition, there was a very high rate of staff turnover, so levels of staff training were very uneven.

In New Jersey, two workers in each welfare office—including a case manager and a child care resource and referral specialist—had direct responsibility for notification and eligibility determination, applications and enrollment. The communication between these two workers was consistent, and apparently accounted for higher utilization. Staff training was more consistent and turnover was lower.

In Morris County, New Jersey, case managers actually walked parents through the application process and eligibility determination, then personally escorted them to meet the child care resource and referral worker for counseling and enrollment. Moreover, Morris County staff had developed uniquely client- and child-centered perspectives. "One of the case managers reported that they tell parents not even to think about working until they have good child care. The needs of the clients and the children are placed first. When the workers assist clients in finding work, they demonstrate a philosophy of respect," Miller explained.

Parent surveys in both states yielded very similar findings about the role of specific techniques of informing parents in either encouraging or discouraging subsidy use.

First, timing is critical. In Georgia, parents were much more likely to use the subsidy if they heard about it when their cash benefits were ending and they were beginning work. Two-thirds of parents who heard about TCC at this critical moment used the subsidy. A similar pattern was detected in New Jersey.

A second key finding was that written information, at least as employed in Georgia and New Jersey at the time of the study, did not get the message across. Although county offices in Georgia mailed written notification letters

of eligibility for TCC to all eligible families, only 27 percent of parents who knew about the program said they had found out about it through written material. New Jersey agencies also notified all TCC-eligible families by mail, but only 10 percent of TCC-eligible parents surveyed remembered receiving this written information. "This finding implies that states cannot rely solely on written information, brochures, and letters to inform parents," Miller noted.

A third discovery is that one notification is typically not enough. The more parents hear about subsidies, the more they are likely to use them. In Georgia, 71 percent of parents receiving TCC said they had learned about it from multiple sources on multiple occasions. They learned about it from family, friends, income maintenance workers, employment caseworkers, and child care workers. In New Jersey's Morris County, the most effective office studied, parents learned about child care subsidies through their case managers and child care resource and referral workers at least twice.

A related, fourth finding is that personal contact is superior to printed materials in conveying information to parents. Clients who know about child care subsidies usually say they heard about them from a particular individual. In Georgia most people remembered hearing about the subsidy from their cash assistance caseworker. In New Jersey the person most often cited as the source of subsidy information was the child care resource and referral worker, followed closely by the case manager.

The fifth finding is that word of mouth does not always work. "In Georgia and New Jersey caseworkers believed that clients learned about child care subsidies via word of mouth in their communities. In actuality, less than 10 percent of parents surveyed in either state said that they had learned about a subsidy from a friend or a neighbor," Miller said.

The sixth finding was that child care providers and child care resource and referral organizations could be better used to inform parents. In New Jersey only five percent of eligible parents heard about child care subsidies from their child care providers. Not one parent in the Georgia focus groups had used a child care resource and referral agency to find out about child care options or child care subsidies.

New Jersey: Partnerships with Parents

Carol Novrit expanded upon CCAC's study findings and explained more about Morris County's success in linking parents to child care subsidies. While Morris County is a fairly affluent suburban county in northern New Jersey with small welfare rolls, its resources for serving that population are also extremely limited.

In January 1995, New Jersey initiated a new welfare-to-work model called the Family Development Program (FDP). Although the program operates statewide, planning and implementation occurs at the county level. This gives counties an opportunity to harness existing community resources. "The

only way you can be successful is if the full community is involved and committed to linking parents to child care subsidies," Novrit emphasized.

Morris County is also unique because it selected the Office of Work Force Development to lead this effort, not the welfare office, a decision Novrit believes is a key to the county's success. "Each parent who comes into the FDP is viewed as an individual who is in need of a job and of a career," she explained. "Thus, everything is done to meet the end goal of full employment...and without the child care subsidies parents cannot stay employed."

Each parent receives an in-depth employment assessment to facilitate job placement. Each member of the family is included in this assessment because understanding family situations is key to identifying employment barriers and helping people obtain and keep a job. Through that assessment, case managers and parents together develop a realistic employability development plan.

The assessment process continues even after the parent finds a job. Case managers begin to talk about the importance of safe and secure child care and its relevance to getting a job or training at this first encounter. Case managers ask parents detailed questions about their child care needs and whether they have made any arrangements for child care, and begin to identify child care options. "We want to be sure that a parent's choice is reliable, safe, secure, and a healthy setting for the child," Novrit emphasized.

The employability development plan includes a child care plan; the parents sign it and keep a copy. As a parent's employment changes, the child care plan is updated as necessary, so a parent always has an idea of what kind of child care she wants and how she can get subsidies for that kind of care.

Once a child care plan is developed, case managers introduce the client to an on-site child care referral worker who helps the parent find child care. However, the case manager continues to stay involved with the parent.

The referral worker is part of a "unified" child care agency that manages all child care subsidies in Morris as in all counties in New Jersey.

Each child care worker in the unified agency can access all available subsidies according to the changing needs and eligibility of each client. This allows for child care to be planned over a long period of time and prevents interruption of child care when families move from one subsidy to another.

To accommodate parents' work schedules, the office is open from 7 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. Its open-door policy allows parents with child care problems or other issues to receive immediate help.

Novrit emphasized that two key elements make Morris County's program successful: the full community comes together to work for a parent, and each parent's needs drive what happens.

Novrit also emphasized the importance of staff expectations. "We just expect that the parents will take advantage of subsidies. We communicate that

throughout our involvement with the parents. We just sell, sell, sell until parents take advantage of child care."

Informing Parents Effectively: Useful Tips

Novrit and Baird agreed that helping parents understand how child care subsidies work is a key to stimulating usage. Novrit's office fosters parents' independent understanding of the subsidies available so if there should be a break in the subsidy parents know how to sign up again. Baird says that the most important information for a parent to know is the duration of the subsidy. While federal laws may allow long-term subsidies, some states have chopped them up into very short-term vouchers or contracts.

"For parents, the stability of the subsidy promotes stability in their lives. Parents need to know what obligation they may have to make sure they keep getting subsidized care," he said.

Baird noted that child care providers can be an excellent source of information for parents about child care subsidies. "Oftentimes the first place a parent comes to look for care is one of our child care centers or family day care homes. They don't know that they're eligible for transitional or post-TANF child care, so we tell them about it," he said.

Churches are also important access points. Many families who make no use of the social services in the community may use their church as a resource for any number of purposes, like food pantries. Because everyone needs to buy food, Baird recommends grocery stores as places to advertise child care subsidies as well. Lastly, other organizations that provide services, like the Salvation Army or homeless agencies, are all points of entry.

Novrit also recommended getting the word out through neighborhood organizations that run programs for children. Schools are also a good site for information and referrals because many times schools recognize that helping a child means helping a family resolve other problems.

Finally, employers can help. "Employers now face a very tight labor market. They are having problems filling positions and are being forced to recognize that potential employees are having problems finding and paying for good quality, affordable child care. So employers are more interested in child care than ever because it serves their interests," Novrit said. She noted that some employers in Morris County have agreed to include child care information in pay check envelopes.

"We also have examples of employers who are interested in sharing the cost of child care as one option on a menu of benefits. It works very well, particularly in two-parent families in which one parent already has medical insurance. The other parent might give that up to get a child care subsidy," Novrit said. There are also examples of employers starting on-site child care centers and providing subsidies to their lower-income employees.

Conclusion

Many strategies exist to reverse the common pattern of under-utilization of transitional child care benefits. Informing parents about child care benefits as their cash benefits end and they begin to work, and informing them personally, repeatedly and through a variety of sources in the community are all effective ways to encourage parents to use child care subsidies. Helping families access quality child care and assisting them in paying for it is an essential support for families as they move off welfare and toward economic self-sufficiency.

About CCAC's Audioconferences on Child Care and Welfare Reform

Child Care Action Campaign (CCAC) is a national nonprofit advocacy organization whose goal is to improve the lives of children and their families by expanding the supply of good quality, affordable child care. Assisted by a panel of advisors in every state, CCAC's 1997 audioconference series on child care and welfare reform has convened policymakers, government officials, state administrators, and child care leaders and advocates across the nation. Through this series, CCAC has worked to get the message out that good quality child care is a crucial component of any welfare-to-work strategy, and to work with state leaders to ensure that low-income families have access to child care benefits.

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